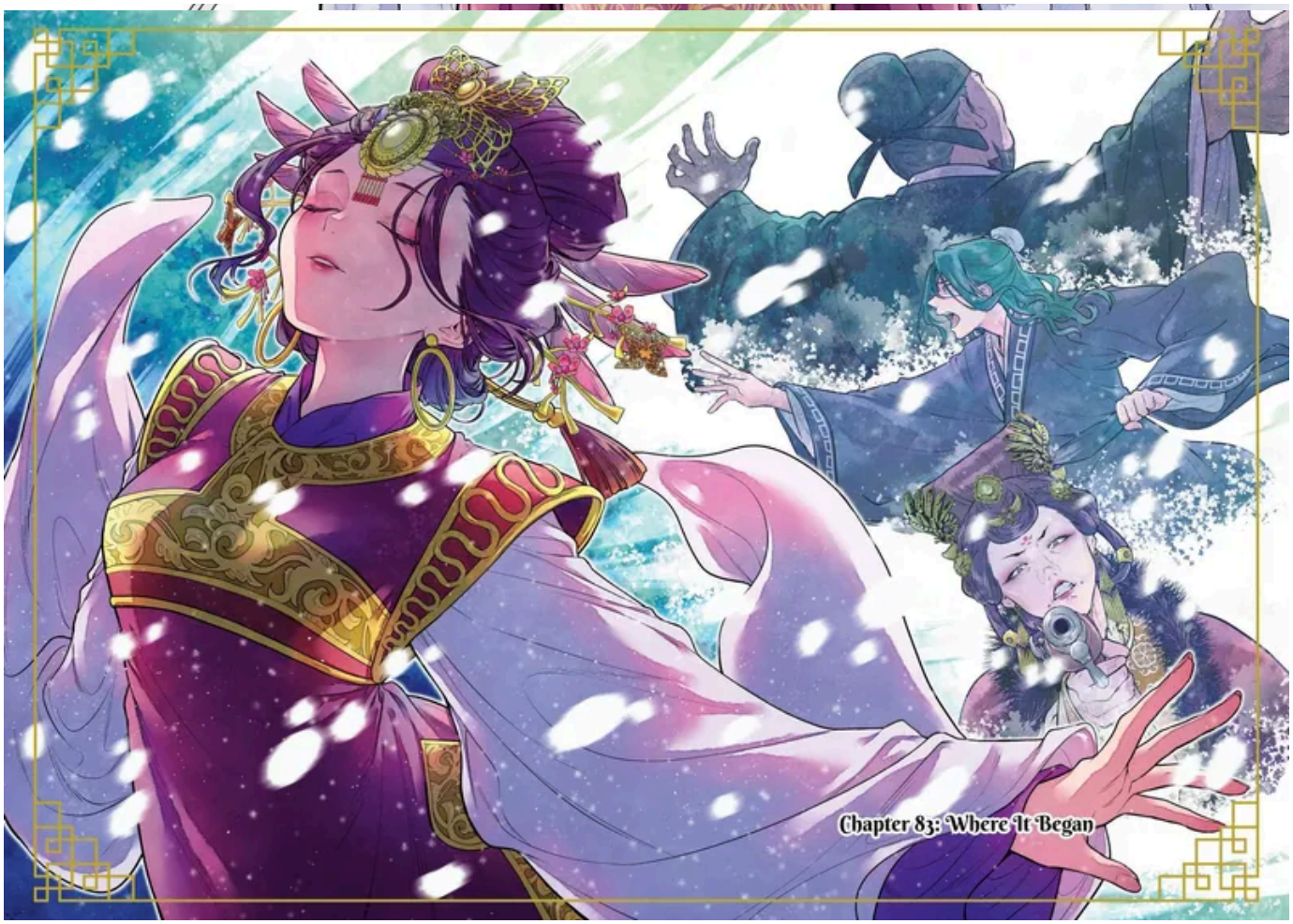
I HOPE SHE MADE IT OUT OF THE FORTRESS SAFELY.
PHWEEEE
BASEN. YOU'RE FAR TOO TENSE. RELAX.
AT THE VERY LEAST, ALLOW ME TO TAKE POINT!
HA HA...


Chapter 83: Where It Began

IS THIS THE RECEPTION HALL?
I'LL OPEN THE WAY!
SIR!
TAKE COVER THE INSTANT THE DOOR IS OPEN.
GRRRK...
THEY'VE BEEN MANU-FACTURING BLACK POWDER ...
...SO THEY MUST HAVE AT LEAST A FEW FEIFA ARMED AND READY.

A FEIFA IS A WEAPON THAT NECESSITATES A GROUP TAKING TURNS WITH THEIR ATTACKS
BANG
BANG
BANG
BECAUSE IF YOU MISS YOUR FIRST SHOT...
...YOU'RE WIDE OPEN WHILE YOU PREPARE YOUR NEXT ONE.
CLANG
CLANG
MOVE IN!

I KNOW THESE MEN.
IS THIS ALL THAT'S LEFT OF THE SHI CLAN, LEFT TO FIGHT THIS LOSING BATTLE?
W-WE DON'T KNOW!
WE WERE TRICKED! DECEIVED!
WHERE IS SHISHOU?

SILENCE!
WE'VE PROOF THAT YOU BRAZENLY STOLE FROM THE THRONE TO FUND THIS RIDICULOUS FARCE!
YOU SHOULD HAVE KNOWN WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO YOU...
...THE INSTANT YOU CHOSE TO TAKE UP ARMS LIKE THIS!
CHK
WE WERE TOLD IT WAS FOR THE GOOD OF THE COUNTRY!
WE—
HH—
SHNK
PSHHH

HMPH
WHAT BECOMES OF YOU IS ALREADY OUT OF MY HANDS.
BEG UNTIL YOUR THROAT RUNS RAW.
DO THEM A KINDNESS.
CLACK
WHY BOTHER DELAYING THE EXECUTION...
...OF MEN FATED FOR THE CHOPPING BLOCK REGARDLESS?
CLACK
CLACK

...SHISHOU.
YOU SPEAK AS THOUGH THIS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH YOU...
BY IMPERIAL DECREE...
SHWP
THE SHI CLAN IS UNDER ARREST.

SWSH
CHK
BWSH
BANG

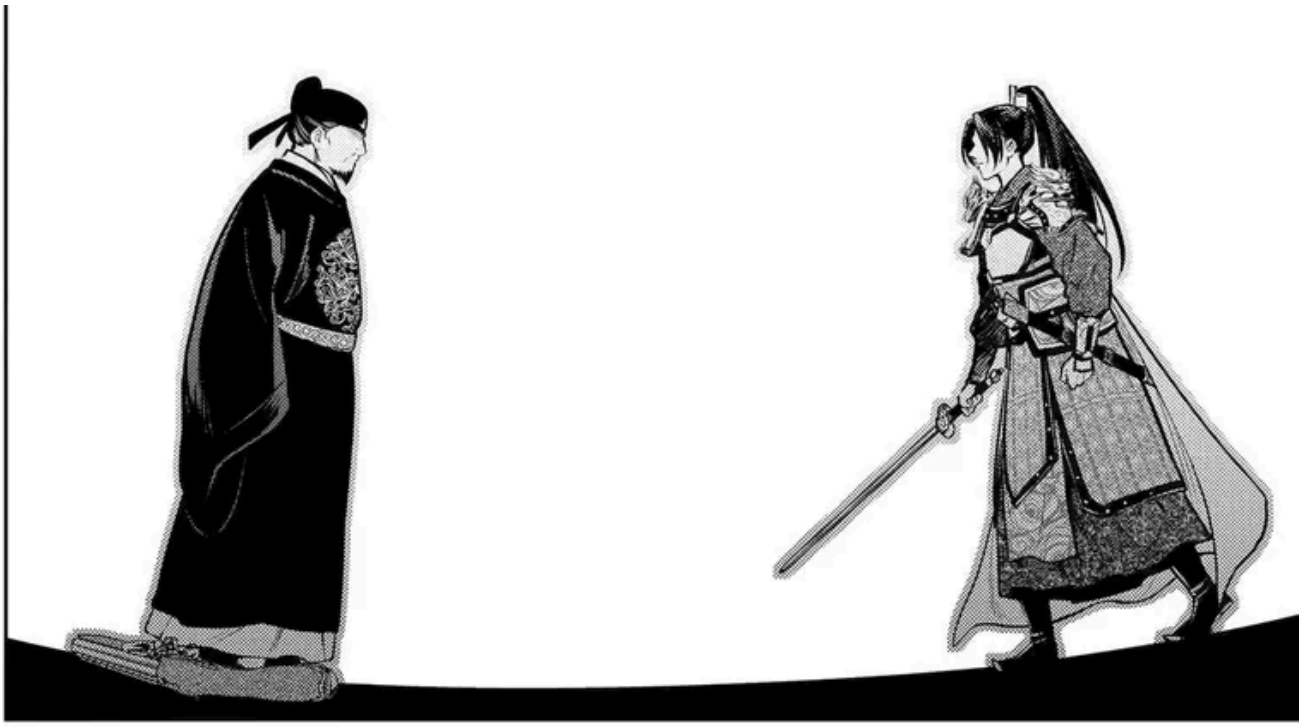
THNK
THD

PATHETIC.

GAAA AAGH HH...!

HMM. SO THIS IS THE END, IS IT?
YOU COULD HARDLY WAIT TO SEE WHAT THEY WOULD DO TO MEN.
I REMEMBER HOW YOU TESTED THESE WEAPONS ON BEASTS.
WHAT?
THE WAY HE'S SPEAKING ...
...IT'S LIKE HE'S READING FROM A SCRIPT.
IF ONLY I'D HAD JUST A LITTLE MORE TIME.

SHAA
HEH



WHAT DO YOU WANT TO TELL ME?
DUN
ATTACK!
DUN

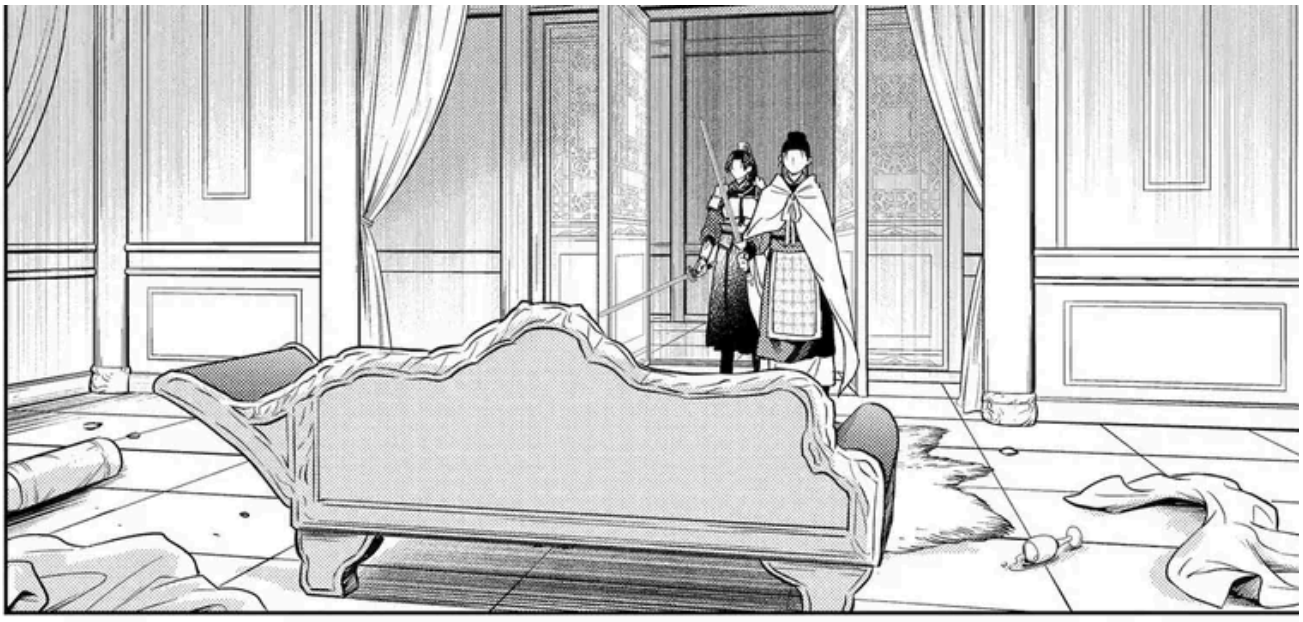
SHNK
GHACK

HAH...
HA
HA
HA
HA
HA
HA
HA
HA
HA
HA

はは
HA
はは
はは
HA
はは
HA
はは
HA
はは…
THUD…

I DOUBT HE WOULD HAVE TOLD ME, EVEN IF I'D ASKED.
I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT WAS GOING THROUGH HIS HEAD.
AS THOUGH THIS WERE A PLAY...
HOW ANTICLI-MACTIC.
CLACK
CLACK

WE'RE PART OF THE SHI CLAN, BUT...
...WE HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH ALL OF THIS!
SHENMEI AND LOULAN ARE IN THE ROOM FURTHER IN!
SIR!
ARREST THEM.
PLEASE, SPARE US!
CLACK
CLACK

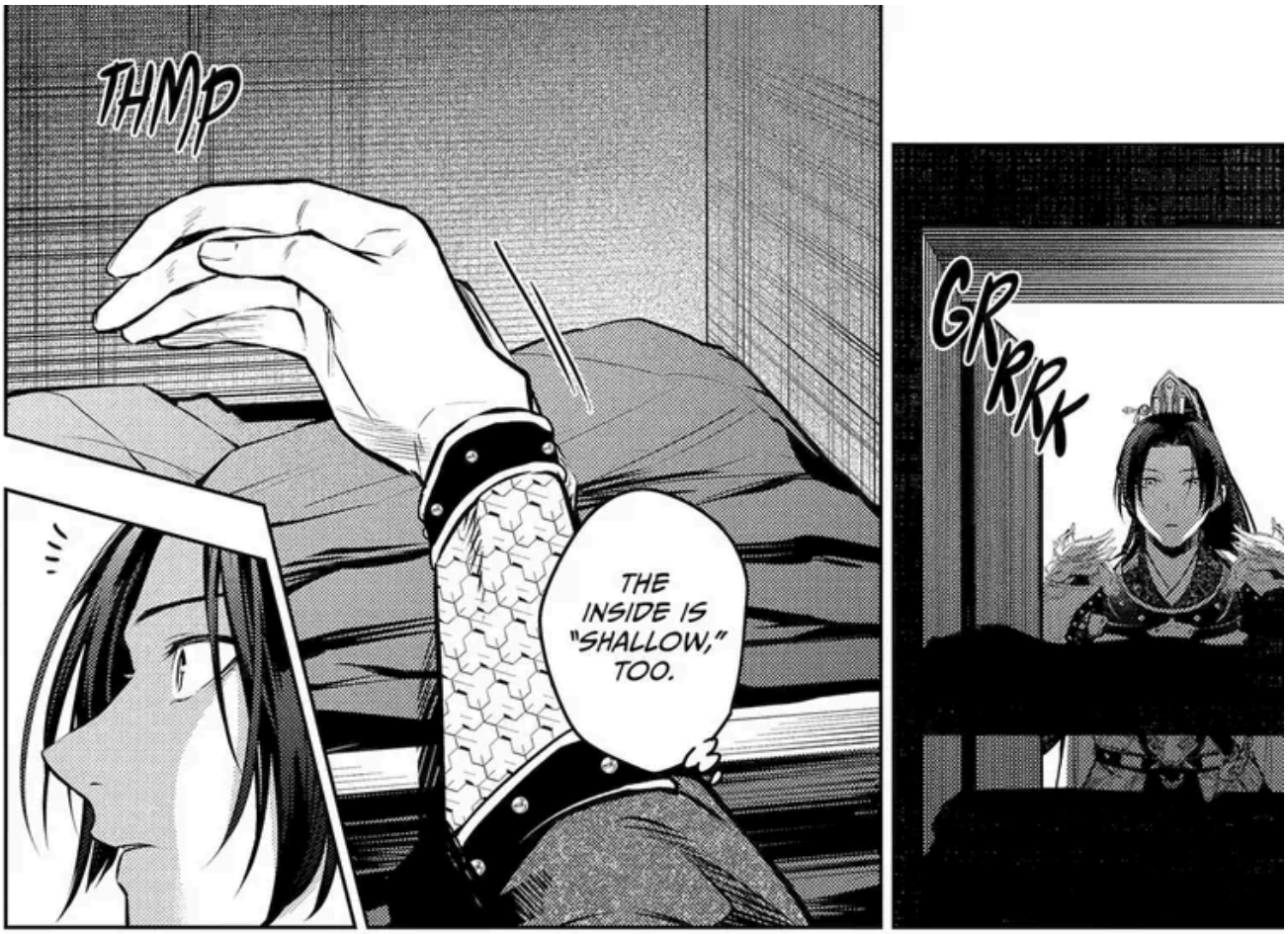


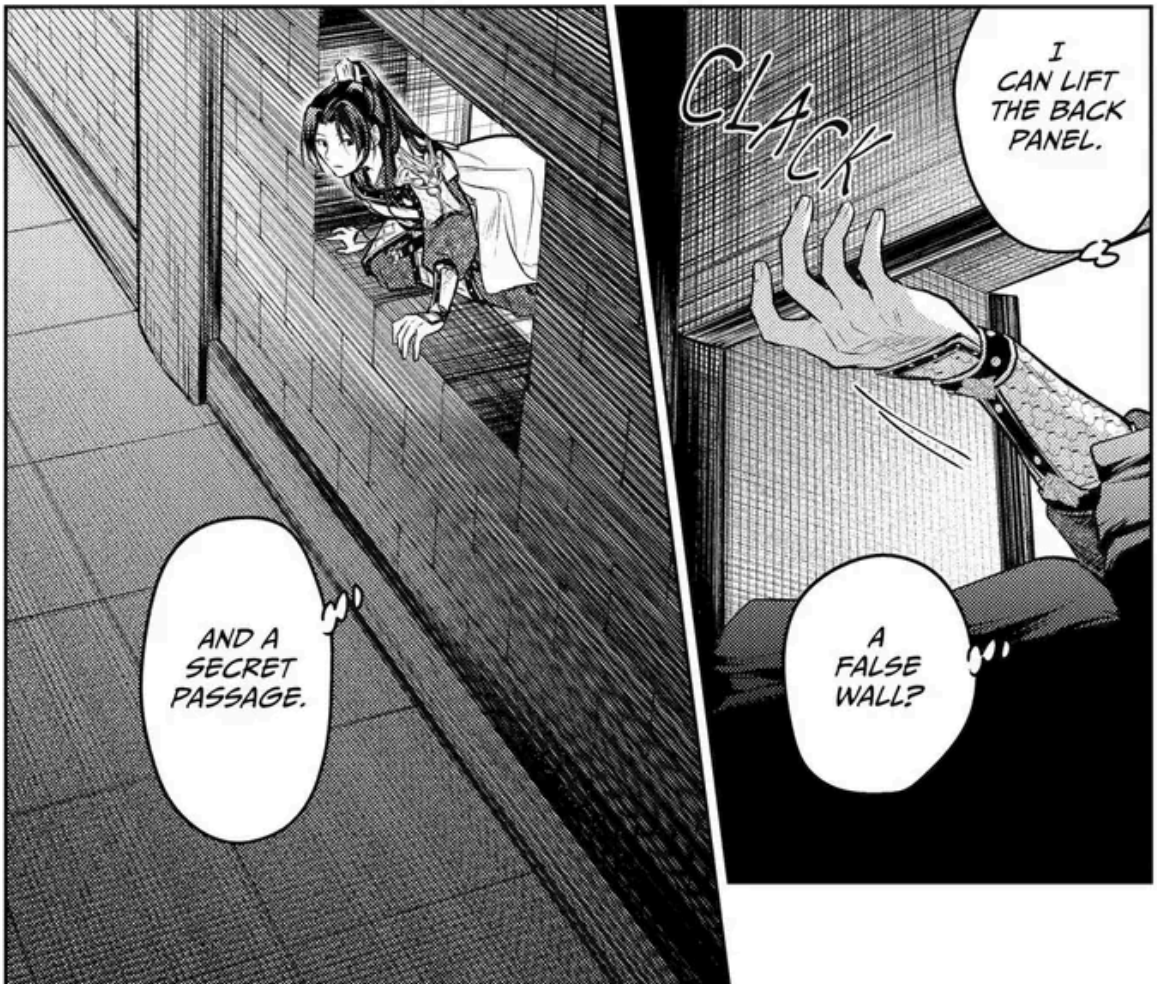
THERE'S NOBODY HERE...

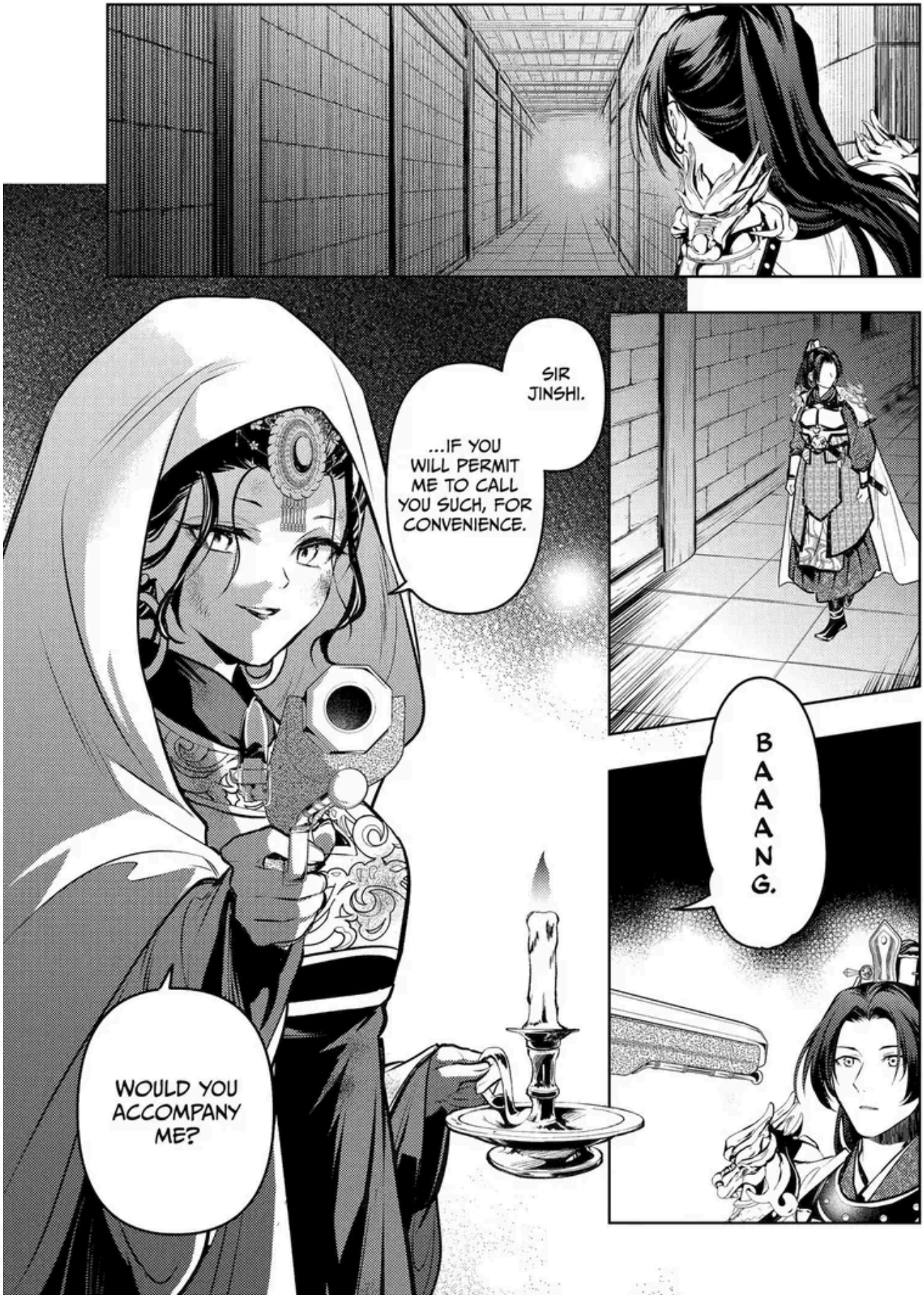
BUT EVEN WITHOUT THAT, I IMAGINE I CAN GUESS WHAT THEY WERE GETTING UP TO HERE.

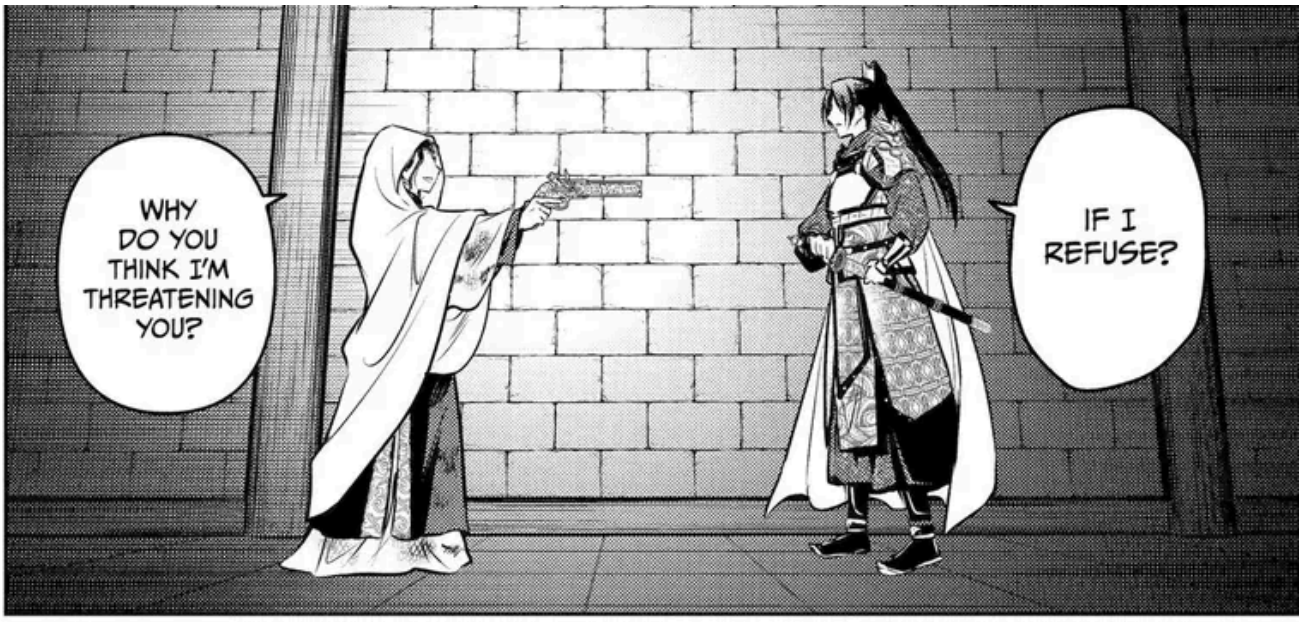
AN APOTHE-CARY...
...MIGHT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO TELL US THE EFFECTS OF THIS INCENSE.
WHAT WERE THEY DOING IN THIS ROOM?

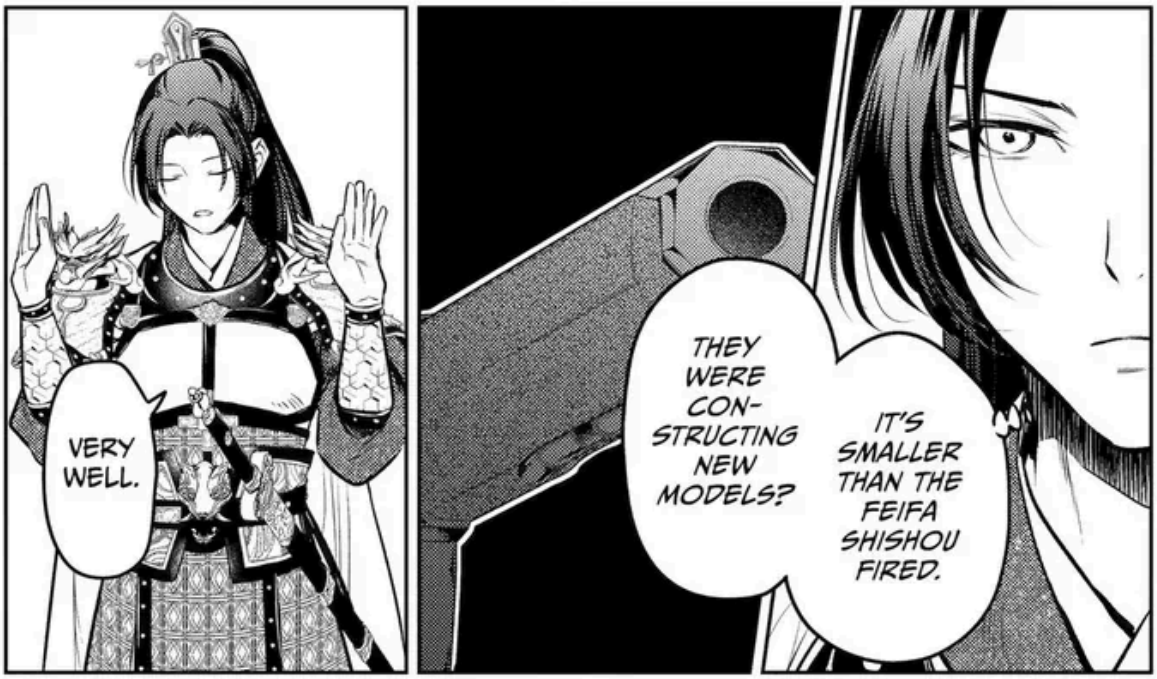
NOBODY IN HERE, EITHER!
WHERE COULD THEY HAVE GONE?
MAYBE THEY LEFT THROUGH THE WINDOW?
CHECK THE BALCONY!
THIS ROOM... SOMETHING IS OFF ABOUT IT.
BASED ON THE BLUEPRINTS, ROOMS NEXT TO EACH OTHER SHOULD ALL BE THE SAME SIZE.
BUT THIS ONE FEELS... SHALLOWER?
LIKE THIS DRESSER IS TAKING UP THAT SPACE.


THMP
THE INSIDE IS "SHALLOW," TOO.
GRRRK


AND A SECRET PASSAGE.
CLACK
I CAN LIFT THE BACK PANEL.
A FALSE WALL?


SIR JINSHI.
...IF YOU WILL PERMIT ME TO CALL YOU SUCH, FOR CONVENIENCE.
WOULD YOU ACCOMPANY ME?
BAAANG.


WHY DO YOU THINK I'M THREATENING YOU?
IF I REFUSE?


VERY WELL.
THEY WERE CONSTRUCTING NEW MODELS?
IT'S SMALLER THAN THE FEIFA SHISHOU FIRED.

CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
YOU'RE REALLY GOING TO COME WITH ME, JUST LIKE THAT?

HEH HEH
YES.
AND YET...
...IT WOULD BE SO SIMPLE FOR YOU TO DISARM ME, NO?
ISN'T THAT WHAT YOU WANT?
...
IT'S STRANGE.
SHE'S NOT AT ALL LIKE SHE WAS IN THE INNER COURT.
RIGHT NOW, SHE FEELS MUCH MORE... HUMAN?

THAT'S WHO YOU'RE LOOKING FOR, ISN'T IT?
...ARE IN THE HIDDEN CHAMBER AHEAD.
MY SISTER— SUIREI... AND MOTHER ...
OF COURSE.
...IT IS.
SHENMEI.
AND HER MOTHER... SHISHOU'S WIFE, DAUGHTER OF THE PRIOR SHI CLAN CHIEFTAIN.
SUIREI.
THE NAME OF THE COURT LADY WHO ROSE FROM THE DEAD.

GRRK
SISTER.
HAS SHE BEEN MISTREATING YOU, EVEN NOW?
LOULAN!
THAT MAN...!
THAT'S SHENMEI?
SHE LOOKS NEARLY IDENTICAL TO HOW LOULAN DID IN THE INNER COURT.

...BECAUSE HIS PROFILE GREATLY RESEMBLES SOMEONE YOU ONCE KNEW?
PERHAPS ...
YOU'VE ALWAYS HATED HIM, HAVEN'T YOU?
THAT'S RIGHT.
I'VE BROUGHT HIM HERE TO... GRANT YOUR PRAYERS.
I JEST, I JEST.
SHVR
SHVR
LOULAN!
THD
OR BECAUSE HIS BEAUTY OUTSTRIPS YOUR OWN?

NOW THEN.
BEFORE FULFILLING YOUR HEART'S DESIRE, MOTHER ...
...HOW ABOUT A SHORT DIVERSION?
THE EMPRESS, WHO RULED FROM THE SHADOWS BY PUPPETTING THE FEEBLE-MINDED EMPEROR ...
THE LONG AND WINDING TALE...
IT BEGAN WITH A MOTHER GROWING IMPATIENT WITH HER FECKLESS SON.
...FLOODED THE INNER COURT WITH GORGEOUS FLOWERS...
...IN THE HOPES OF STIRRING HIS INTEREST IN WOMEN.
...THAT BROUGHT US ALL TO THIS FORTRESS.

ONE DAY, SHE SPOKE TO THE HEAD OF THE SHI CLAN.
SHE TOLD HIM TO OFFER ONE OF HIS CLAN'S DAUGHTERS TO THE EMPEROR. TO BE ONE OF HIS PRINCIPAL CONSORTS.
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT...
... LOULAN ?
THAT WAS, AT LEAST, THE REASON GIVEN OUTWARDLY.
YOU HADN'T HEARD ABOUT THIS?
MY, SO MUCH GOES OVER YOUR HEAD, DOESN'T IT?
GRAND-FATHER REVEALED THIS ON HIS DEATHBED ...
... SPITTING EACH WORD LIKE A CURSE.

INDEED.
IT WAS A PROPOSAL FOR A NEW ENTERPRISE.
WHY DID THE INNER COURT GROW SO LARGE, SIR JINSHI? DO YOU KNOW?
I HAD HEARD SHISHOU CONVINCED THE EMPRESS TO EXPAND IT...
IT'S NOT UNCOMMON FOR SENIOR OFFICIALS TO HAVE THEIR DAUGHTERS BE TAKEN HOSTAGE, EFFECTIVELY, AS CONSORTS.
A MEANS TO DEAL WITH THE SLAVE TRADE.

THE SLAVE TRADE WAS STILL GOING STRONG AT THE TIME, EVEN WITHIN THE IMPERIAL COURT.
THE SLAVES LABORED TO EARN ENOUGH TO COVER THE PRICE THEY SOLD FOR...
...OR FOR A PERIOD OF INDENTURED SERVITUDE. THEN, THEY WERE SET FREE.
BUT THE PRACTICE WAS LIMITED TO WITHIN THE NATION'S BORDERS.
SELLING SLAVES OUTSIDE OF THE COUNTRY WAS PROHIBITED.
AND YET, PROHIBITING TRADE...
...NEVER SEEMS TO STOP ESPECIALLY LUCRATIVE VENTURES.
IS SLAVERY TRULY SO PROFITABLE?
YOUNG GIRLS FETCHED THE HIGHEST PRICES, I'VE HEARD.
THUS, GRANDFATHER WAS COMPELLED TO GIVE UP HIS DAUGHTER AS COLLATERAL.
THEN...
...HE WAS MADE TO CURTAIL HIS INVOLVEMENT IN THE SLAVE TRADE.

...THAT FATHER PROPOSED GATHERING UP YOUNG WOMEN AND EUNUCHS WHO WOULD OTHERWISE BE SLAVES...
...AND KEEP THEM SAFE WITHIN THE INNER COURT.
IT WAS THEN...
YET STILL, SLAVES CONTINUED TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY.
...BOTH AS A POLICYMAKER AND AS A MOTHER.
THIS APPEALED TO THE EMPRESS ...
...TO CURRY FAVOR WITH THE EMPRESS?
DOES IT STILL ESCAPE YOU WHY FATHER WORKED SO TIRELESSLY...
SO, MOTHER.

FATHER HAD BEEN ADOPTED INTO THE MAIN FAMILY...
...FOR HIS INTELLECT AND FOR HIS LINEAGE...
THUS, WITH HIS FIANCÉE SEQUESTERED IN THE INNER COURT...
...AND YET HE WAS STILL BUT A BRANCH MEMBER.
...HE DID ALL HE COULD TO REHABILITATE THE SHI CLAN'S REPUTATION...
...AND TURNED THE INNER COURT INTO A REFUGE.

OR...
...WERE YOU UNABLE TO TRUST A MAN THAT WOULD WILLINGLY THROW AWAY HIS POSITION ...
...IF IT MEANT ESCAPING WITH YOU?
IF EVERYTHING WAS GOING TO END UP LIKE THIS, MOTHER ...
...WHY DIDN'T YOU SIMPLY RUN AWAY FROM THE INNER COURT TO BEGIN WITH?
FATHER DID ALL THAT WORK FOR NOTHING.
YOU...!
LOULAN ...!
...TRUST THAT MAN!
BAM
I COULD NEVER ...

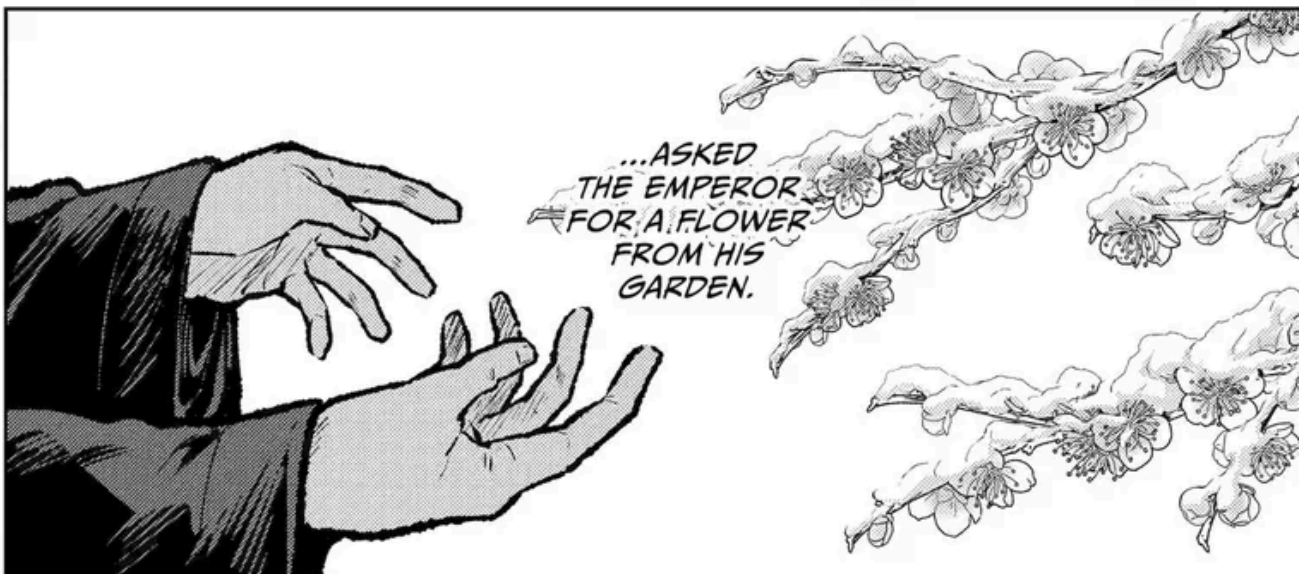
JOLT
HE TOOK OVER THE CLAN THE MOMENT MY FATHER PASSED!
AND THEN HE MARRIED THIS GIRL'S WHORE MOTHER!
HEH
YOU COULD NEVER TRUST HIM?
DID YOU EVER TRY TO UNDERSTAND HIM TO BEGIN WITH?

CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
SWSH
A PHOENIX ENGRAVED IN SILVER?

JUST LIKE THE QILIN ENGRAVED IN MY HAIRPIN...
IT COULDN'T BE...
...THE PHOENIX IS RESERVED ONLY FOR A SELECT FEW.
I DOUBT THE EMPEROR EVER IMAGINED ...
...HIS OWN GRANDDAUGHTER WOULD BE STRIPPED OF EVERYTHING, SAVE THIS PIECE OF SILVER...
...AND TREATED AS THE CHILD OF A CONCUBINE.

...HE FREQUENTLY VISITED THE PHYSICIAN HE HAD EXILED...
...AND THE CHILD HE HAD DISOWNED.
BEFORE THE EMPEROR BECAME BEDRIDDEN ...
WAS IT GUILT? OR DID HE KNOW SHE REALLY WAS HIS DAUGHTER?
AT SUCH TIMES, HE OFTEN PLEADED FOR FATHER...
...TO TAKE THAT GIRL AS HIS WIFE.
AND IN RETURN, THE EMPEROR WOULD GRANT ANY WISH FATHER DESIRED.
HOW COULD HE POSSIBLY REFUSE?

FATHER HAD THE IMPERIAL FAMILY'S FULL CONFIDENCE.
AND HE WAS SET TO REPLACE THE HEAD OF THE SHI CLAN THAT HAD OFFENDED THE EMPRESS SO.
THIS WAS HIS CHANCE TO FINALLY FREE YOU FROM THE INNER COURT.
FATHER...


...ASKED THE EMPEROR FOR A FLOWER FROM HIS GARDEN.

AND THAT...
...IS WHY YOU WERE BESTOWED TO HIM.
L... LIES!
DRIVEL?
EVERYTHING FATHER HAS EVER DONE WAS FOR YOUR SAKE.
STOP SPOUTING THIS DRIVEL!
THEY CALLED HIM A TANUKI.
AND TANUKIS ARE, IN TRUTH, TIMID CREATURES.
IT'S BECAUSE THEY KNOW JUST HOW SMALL AND WEAK THEY ARE...
...THAT DECEPTION IS THEIR MAIN WEAPON.

EVEN KNOWING ALL THEY HAVE TO LOOK FORWARD TO IS RUIN.

REALLY. DO YOU STILL NOT GET IT?
THEN IT'S GOOD I BROUGHT SIR JINSHI HERE.

...HE LAUGHED WITH HIS FINAL BREATHS.
OH, SIR JINSHI?
DID FATHER SEE HIS PART AS THE VILLAIN THROUGH, ALL THE WAY TO THE END?

HE WAS A SELFISH, POWER HUNGRY MAN!
HE ONLY MARRIED ME TO HAVE A TROPHY! PROOF OF HIS CONQUEST!
SHUT UP!

EACH AND EVERY ONE A FOOL...
...TAKING DIRTY MONEY FOR YOUR AMBITIONS.
AND YET...
...THE WHOLE CLAN WAS EVER AT YOUR BECK AND CALL, WEREN'T THEY?

I ONLY EVER DID AS YOU COMMANDED, MOTHER.
YOU...
THIS WHOLE TIME...
...HAVE YOU BEEN PART OF HIS SCHEMES?! DECEIVING ME?!
STILL, I MUST ASK...
DID YOU TRULY BELIEVE YOUR CADRE OF GULLIBLE SYCOPHANTS ...
...EVER STOOD A CHANCE AT OVERCOMING THE IMPERIAL ARMY?

WOULD YOU KINDLY HAND IT BACK?
MOTHER. THAT IS A DANGEROUS WEAPON.
YOU KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT!
ENOUGH!